



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Report on Rural-Urban Women's Conference, Washington, D. C., April 13-14, 1939

by

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On the 13th and 14th of last April, twenty-five women from the country and twenty-five from the cities of the United States, were invited by our Secretary of Agriculture, Hon. Henry A. Wallace, to attend a conference in Washington, to talk with Secretary Wallace, his assistants and a group of specialists of the Department of Agriculture, on the subject of "Abundance For the People of America".

On my arrival in Washington, I was met at the train by our Chief of Home Management of the Farm Security Administration, Mrs. Clara V. Thompson, who saw me comfortably settled in the Roosevelt Hotel where reservations had been made for the entire group, and acted as hostess all the time I was in Washington.

There were three other women from the Farm Security Projects there; one from Minnesota, one from Utah and one from Georgia.

On the opening morning of the Conference we all met in the conference room of one of those tremendous government buildings on Constitution Avenue and after being seated around long tables arranged in an oval shape so that every one could see every one else, we introduced ourselves, told who we were, where we were from and what we did.

After a warm welcome by Assistant Secretary Harry Brown, who among other things very gallantly said "the men had gotten the affairs of the nation in such a muddle they had to call on the women to come to Washington and help them find a way out", he quoted from the letters we had received from Secretary Wallace who asked us to come up to Washington and discuss whether or not we had an abundance in America.

The whole United States was represented. Women were there from Texas to Oregon on the West coast. and from Georgia to Massachusetts on the East coast. Mrs. Edwin Bevans, Chairman of the General Federation of Women's Clubs of Arkansas, was chairman.

Some of the questions presented were: "Do we in America have abundance? What do we need to provide to raise our country toward continued and increasing abundance? How can we co-operate as producers and consumers in efforts to set up clearer pathways to this abundance?"

When a question was brought up it was discussed from many different angles, giving everyone an opportunity to express their views as to our living conditions, whether we have an abundant life with all the things that go to make life

worth while, or whether there is a real lack among the people of America as a whole. After looking at the question from many viewpoints, Mr. Jones, one of the experts from the Department of Agriculture, would summarize our conversation, so that we could really see just what conditions were all over our country.

In speaking of rural conditions in the State of Iowa, someone stated that many of the houses were unpainted and in need of repairs, only about one-fourth had electricity and only about 8% had running water. A city woman stated that in some sections of her city as many as four hundred were crowded into one city block. Another stated that while in Georgia a few days before she found many people eating pepper grass as their only substitute for fruit and vegetables. She said her conscience hurt her in the winter when she lay down in a warm bed, took a hot bath or ate a square meal when there was such a lack among so many people of our country.

After a number of facts and figures were given by an expert in Economics, Dr. Ezekiel, it was agreed that while we do not have an abundance in America, we do have a potential abundance. That is, with out resources, and capacity to produce, we could have abundance...a plenty of food for everyone, clothes sufficient for everyone, and even automobiles.

But the question was asked: "Do we deserve it? If so, what is the matter? Why don't we have it?" It was shown that one-third of the nation was ill-housed, ill-clothed and ill-fed. By being ill-fed it was meant that they did not have a balanced diet sufficient to keep their bodies in a normal healthy condition. It was then agreed that there was a great lack of education, that such a large percent of the people do not know what they should eat. For instance, it has been said of us here in the south that we live on "hog and hominy", "meat and bread", when we could have everything in the way of food that we need if we were educated enough to know our needs. The lack of education of the homemakers of America, particularly with regard to diet and how to feed the family properly, is deplorable. One woman with a knowledge of food values and body requirements can take a small amount of money and purchase a suitable diet for her family, while another without a knowledge of these things can take the same amount of money and merely buy a lot of stuff.

Another woman pointed out that the shortage of educational facilities to give such training to those who need it, is a part of the lack of abundance. It was brought out that the kind of education along this line that is needed, is a way to get these people to change their habits of eating, and make them see that they do not have to eat side meat and dried beans, especially here in the south where we can have year round green gardens. This applies to people on the farm, of course.

A woman from South Dakota stated that their lack of educational facilities was such that some boys and girls had to walk as far as ten and fifteen miles to school.

Both Secretary Wallace and Assistant Secretary Brown sat in Conference with us all the afternoon, and after the meeting adjourned for the day, the whole group accepted an invitation to visit Mrs. Roosevelt at the White House. She received us in the East Room, which is called the State's parlor and is used as a reception room.

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From the White House we took a bus for a sightseeing trip. We drove down by the broad Potomac River. The cherry blossoms were almost gone, but we saw enough to imagine how beautiful they must be in their prime. We saw the Washington Monument, Arlington Memorial Bridge which links the State of Virginia with the District of Columbia, and the beautiful Lincoln Memorial where on Sunday afternoon before, a Southern Negro Woman had held thousands spell-bound as she stood on the spacious steps and sang with that deep, rich voice that belongs peculiarly to the Negro of the South.

So many of the women had never visited our Capitol before. It was amusing to listen to their comments on the different sights.

We were taken back to our hotel where at eight o'clock we went down to a special dining-room where we had dinner with Secretary Wallace. I had to pinch myself to see if it were really me when I found myself seated with the Assistant Secretary on my right and the Assistant Administrator of the AAA on my left, and they were both FARMERS! Just the plainest, nicest folks imaginable.

After dinner Mr. Wallace made an address. His subject was "Abundance From the Standpoint of Children". He showed the effect that coming from homes where food was scarce, schooling poor and where there were none of the finer things of life, had on the lives of children. Such children were handicapped, he said, when confronted with the problems of life. He discussed the Agricultural situation of to-day and its relation to abundant living. He said that our chief concern is in seeing that the children of the next generation have adequate food, training and schooling so that they may have equal opportunities when they go out in the world to seek a living. He said that we had the resources in the United States to do just that.

On the morning of the second day of the conference, the four of us who were Farm Security Clients were invited on a sight-seeing trip by one of the Officials in the Washington Office, Mr. Henson. He and Mrs. Thompson showed us Arlington National Cemetery, the Capitol, the Congressional Library and as many other places as possible before the meeting opened.

The meeting began with the question, "What one thing would you do if you had the power, to solve the problem of abundance for the people of America?" One said, "Start industry, put people to work". Another said, "Create good will among people, teach them to co-operate, to get together". Other answers were, "To have a standard yearly wage among labor instead of an hour wage". "To educate both children and adults". "To have a common meeting ground between agriculture, industry and labor". "To have the producer and consumer realize they have the same problems to meet".

The tenant problem was discussed. In some places in the middle west in the stock and grain states, it seems that the system is quite different from ours here. Tenants stay on the same farm year after year; there is not the moving, floating condition we know here in the south. Their homes are more comfortable, they make a better living, and those women I talked with who came from tenant homes, seemed very well satisfied. Over the country as a whole, it was shown that the tenant system is very expensive. It was estimated that about twenty-five million dollars were spent yearly by tenants moving from place to place, trying to find better homes, better conditions. It was said that here in our Southland there are several hundred thousand farm families who have no cow or chickens, and many thousands without gardens.

Some of the things the F.S.A. is doing to help the tenants to higher levels of living, were brought out, such as creating in them a feeling of ownership and instilling in them that pride of ownership which will go far toward making better citizens and a more abundant living for those citizens.

One thing which went a long way toward giving us all a better understanding of living conditions in America, was the way in which we were resented around the table from time to time, so the city woman could talk with the country woman, and the woman from the east could hear how they live in the west. What women find out when seated side by side and talking in undertones, is, a plenty!

This Conference served to broaden our perspective, to make us think in terms other than just our problems, to see how so many of our city people live, and how the different labor laws affect the living conditions of our helpless little children. With all the food that we have here in America in the country, it is hard to realize that some pitiful little children actually go hungry. I feel very keenly that we should not forget the scriptural injunction "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to us."

And now I cannot conclude this report of my trip to Washington, without telling you how perfectly lovely the people from the FSA were to the four of us who went from the Projects. Mrs. Thompson and Miss Souder were with us almost the entire time we were there, and did everything possible for our comfort and happiness. They took us to Dr. Alexander's Office, where we were received so kindly that I am afraid we imposed on him and took too much of his time. Also, they took us to Dr. Mitchell's Office where he had called a whole room full of people in to visit with us, and we were made to feel more grateful than ever for what the Administration is doing for us. We were made to see and appreciate that they are thinking in large terms of how to do the greatest good for the largest number of people. So with a feeling of inexpressible gratitude for what the Government, the Department of Agriculture and the Farm Security Administration, are doing for us, I bring this report to a close.

